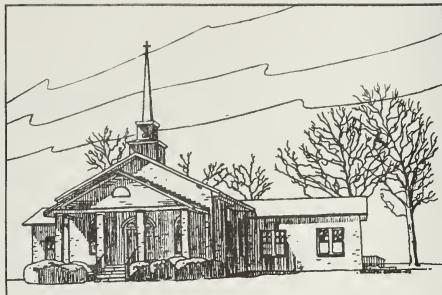


# **Altan Presbyterian Church**

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## **A Brief History of Altan Presbyterian Church and The Altan Community of Union County, North Carolina**

By

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## ALTAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Founded 1893

### A Brief History

In celebration of our Centennial, a brief history has been compiled with a more complete history to be printed.

It is important to look at the time leading up to the founding of our church. In his book about Union County, published in 1937, George Winchester writes: "perhaps the greatest change of all is to be found in the spirit of the people who have lived through the period following the Civil War in that out of the travail of thirty-five years following the close of the war they have ascended almost the depths of dispair to the pinnacle of hope and are now rejoicing in their achievements and in the promise of the future."

All of the south had its resources depleted by the war. The Confederate army took supplies as needed to sustain themselves. The Union Army took not only supplies, but anything that was not nailed down. By the close of the war, the south had been laid waste with many of the fine homes burned, churches destroyed, cattle, horses, mules and other farm animals either destroyed or taken . It is reported that Sherman's men moved through this area on their way home with a heard of cattle estimated to be over 5000 in number.

The close of the war saw our citizens without money since the currency in the south was now without value. Possessions and supplies were gone and there were no resources with which to begin to rebuild except the people themselves.

Adding to an already terrible situation, the crops failed in 1866. The drought lasted from June until September. The people of this county were destitute. Quoting from a letter dated 1867, written by John D. Stewart of the Board of Wardens of the Poor for Union County: "We have about 2000 extremely indigent in this county and about 6000 others who are not able to raise a crop. We are smitten with a famine and those who are able to sustain themselves can do but little to aid their neighbors." This letter was written to Mrs. Mary Mildred Sullivan of New York to acknowledge the financial assistance that she was making to the citizens of this county. Mrs. Sullivan sent money to purchase corn and wheat to supply meal and flour for those in need.

In another letter of thanks written to Mrs. Sullivan, it is interesting to note that the writer is Colonel Samuel Walkup who had been the commanding officer of the Confederate troops of Union County.

With this background, our church history begins to take shape in January 1886 when Horatio Gates Hotchkiss, his wife Elizabeth and daughter, Eva, moved to what is now the Altan Community from Windsor, New York.



They purchased a farm from Darling Belk because of a vein of gold bearing quartz found there. The mine was immediately put into operation and buildings were constructed along with a saw mill operation.

Hotchkiss named the mine "Altan" which means "place of gold." The name was painted in large letters around the top of the smoke stack for the sawmill. Altan appears as the name of the community on the county map of 1896.

In 1888, Eva Hotchkiss was operating the Altan Academy. Quoting from a short history written by "Miss Eva" concerning the school: "to give the children a chance at knowledge and happiness, to teach them righteousness means 'right living,' and that Christianity is not a dogma or ism, but just keeping step with the teachings of Christ, this was the aim, first, last and all the time of the Altan school."

"Miss Eva" writes that in her contact with the young people in the community, she came to realize that many were intelligent, eager to learn and capable of going far if an opportunity were given them. The few schools that were operating at that time were only open for a few weeks in the year. "Miss Eva" quoted one of the teachers as saying: "I ain't much on grammar but I can lick any sum in the 'rithmetic."

As a result, "Miss Eva" set about the task of starting a full time school. At first, she used the mine office building. It was fitted with desks, seats and a blackboard. She was prepared for fifteen or twenty students. But, soon there were so many that all that could be done was to "fall over each other's feet."

A man from Monroe named John Bates, who had connections with interested, wealthy, philanthropic people in New York assisted "Miss Eva" in securing funds for her new school. In the fall of 1889, the new Altan Academy opened on what is now the Church property. Land had been purchased and a large school building had been built with much of the funds provided by "one of the New York ladies who had given liberally."

"Miss Eva" writes that hundreds of boys and girls availed themselves of the opportunities offered by the school. By her own records, approximately 30 students were sent on to college at no expense to their families. Nine of those students attended Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee.

Along with the school, a Sunday School was opened and later a Christian Endeavor Society was formed. There was a weekly social evening, frequent entertainment, a Christmas tree with gifts for each school member, military drills and athletic contests. Every effort was made to benefit the children and to give them a broader outlook on life.

The Academy was operated by "Miss Eva" for thirteen years and at one time appears to have had six teachers conducting classes which is most unusual for the time since most schools were of the one-room variety.



The financial support for this school was being provided by the Board of Home Missions of the Northern Presbyterian Church. They provided funds for the teacher's salaries, books, stationery and all necessary supplies including medical supplies.

Even among faithful "church people", old feelings sometimes die hard. The Southern Presbyterian Church became concerned with the activity of the Northern Church in what was considered to be Southern church territory. After much discussion, the Northern Church withdrew from the area. This appears to have taken place in 1891 or 1892.

At a meeting of Mecklenburg Presbyterian held in Charlotte at the 2nd Presbyterian Church on May 9, 1893, a petition signed by Miss Eva E. Hotchkiss and "sundry other persons" asking for the organization of a Presbyterian Church at Altan, North Carolina was presented by Reverend William Black.

Mecklenburg Presbytery met in Shelby, North Carolina on September 11, 1893 and a report was given that Altan Church organized on July 19, 1893 with sixteen charter members listed.

On August 20, 1893, George Walter Belk was elected Elder and Clerk of Session. He was ordained and installed by Reverend H. M. Dixon. On this date, John McManus and Mary E. Bruce, later married to Robert E. Lee Belk, joined Altan Church.

December 24, 1894, Eva E. Hotchkiss and George Walter Belk were married. Their daughter, Dorothea, was born March 3, 1896 and appears to be the first infant baptised at Altan Church.

The Session record of 1897 shows that there were 34 members; but, only two were listed as head of family in the records. The other members were women and students. In the statistical report to Presbytery that year there is a question concerning the financial support of the church. The answer is: "The people are very poor and give what they are able."

From August 1897 until July 1903, there was no communion service held and from June 1899 until July 1903, there was no preaching service. The Sunday School and the Christian Endeavor Society met every Sunday during this time except when weather prevented travel.

"Miss Eva" writes that "finances compelled them (Eva and Walter) to leave in 1901. On December 15, 1913, "Miss Eva" deeded the school property to the trustees of Altan Presbyterian Church. At that time, Eva and Walter Belk were living in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Around 1930, they returned to Altan and built the rock house across the road from the church.



Shortly before "Miss Eva" and Walter Belk returned to Altan, the church burned. The fire occurred on December 22, 1929 at approximately 10:00 pm and the Monroe Enquirer reported that the fire had a mysterious origin.

On January 3, 1930, the congregation conducted services at the "new" Altan School which was located adjacent to the church property and was operated by Union County Board of Education. The minutes of the congregational meeting show that the meeting started after "Divine Worship." The question before the congregation was whether to rebuild the church. The vote was, *"At once."* J. B. Yarborough, R. W. Elliott and Walter Crook were selected as the building committee.

On January 26, 1930, the committee reported to the congregation and recommended that a brick building to duplicate Wesley Chapel ME Church be constructed. The congregation voted to proceed and to "let the contract as soon as expedient."

On Sunday, August 31, 1930, the congregation celebrated its first service of worship in the new brick building. The bricks for the building were donated by Henry Belk of the Belk Stores family. The Belk family support of the Presbyterian Churches in this area is well documented. The nails were donated by H. F. "Doc" McCray, Sr., of the Wolfe Pond community. The piano was bought by the Women of the Church with money from the sale of eggs laid by their hens on Sunday.

The debt incurred in building was paid by the members working some farmland donated for the purpose by Washington Belk. Cotton and cane were the crops raised.

There are three unusual elements to the story of the beginning of this church. First, we have a "yankee" in the midst of a small, rural southern community where the impact of a terrible war still weighed heavily on the people. Yet, we see no evidence of there being a problem of acceptance in the community.

Second, we find a woman taking the leading role in the development of a church at a time when women were not even allowed to speak out in the congregations. All of the minutes of the session during the early years are in the handwriting of Eva Hotchkiss Belk. Her husband, Walter, was Clerk of Session but we know that he was rarely here because his employment carried his to West Virginia and Colorado during these years. It appears that "Miss Eva" functioned as clerk in his absence and carried on the work of the church as well as that of the school.

And last, it is the general nature of people to devote effort to things which will bring some degree of financial reward. The development of Altan Academy which formed the beginning of Altan Church clearly offered no financial return to "Miss Eva." In fact, all evidence points to her putting her own money into the school and church.

Adversity, sacrifice and unselfish giving of money and talents formed this church. Every individual has played an important role in the growth of the church as well as the



community. Without God's guiding hand throughout the years, this congregation could not exist to continue in the role of spreading the Gospel.

As time goes on, we continue to write new chapters of our church story. We are moving into our second hundred years and we ask God to guide us that we may be true followers as we continue on the journey started so long ago. We do not know what the future holds; but, neither did those who came before us. The future is unlimited. Under God's Grace, which is always full of hope, we set out to do His work. God be with us. Amen.

Prepared by Edwina W. Eubanks  
Clerk of Session  
Altan Presbyterian Church



Mecklenburg Ply  
396 minutes

Alton Academy Union Co. Ill. -  
July 19- 1893.

The Presbytery met by Commission after  
service was constituted with prayer present:  
Rev. Mr. Black Chairman presiding  
E. L. Siler Clerk  
A. M. Dixon

Elder F. D. Hawley from Polkton church  
S. E. Belk Beulah "

The following persons presented testimonials  
of Membership: Rev. Elizabeth Belk, Geo. W. Beck,  
Thurlow W. Beck Miss Eva Hockhiss, Allison Beck,  
Mrs. Angelina Holden, Mrs. Milzy Harris, Bigu Harris,  
Geo. Walter Belk, Robt W. Bruce, John W. Belk, Henry  
C. Belk, Julia R. Beck, Jimmie Belk, Grace Belk.

15- Willie Arthur Beck was received to membership on  
examination. All of these (16) members  
then asked to be organized into a Presbyterian church.  
Order was then taken for the organization. Thereupon  
these members concuranted to walk together as a church  
on the faith & order of the Presbyterian Church & to study  
the purity, harmony of the whole body & were declared  
a church, constituted according to the Word of God  
The faith & order of the Presbyterian Church in the  
United States. By vote of the members their church  
was named the Alton Presbyterian church. The Presby-  
tery adjourned with prayer. The Black, Elmer  
Johnston, Stated Clerk - E. L. Siler Clerk





Eva Hotchkiss Belk  
1855-1936

George Walter Belk  
1872-1941



